


Emails Reveal Council's True Feelings

Councilman: Dimock 'Thugs' 'Pirating' Montrose Water

By Dave Greber



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March 13, 2012 Updated Mar 14, 2012 at 12:00 AM EDT

Water flowing from a two-and-a-half foot tall spigot on a quiet street in Montrose has sparked a firestorm that's pitted residents against neighbors, the borough council against its owner and a sea change in local meeting laws.

Craig Stevens, of nearby Silver Lake Twp., ordered the hydrant installed in January on a commercial lot on Jessup Street. That was weeks after Cabot Oil & Gas halted water deliveries to residents living along Carter Road in Dimock Twp., who have long claimed natural gas drilling on their properties made their water unusable.

Stevens owns the hydrant. He pays for the account. And he pays Ray Kemble to truck 500 gallons of Pennsylvania American water from the Lake Montrose-supplied spigot some six miles away to Carter Road. He asks for nothing in return. The deliveries are made several times each week — sometimes twice a day, when needed.

But the donations haven't come easy, Stevens said.

Within days of its installation, Stevens says he and his driver fell victim to verbal assaults from Jessup Street residents. He claims one neighbor physically assaulted Kemble as he filled the tank in the bed of his truck. Charges were never filed. Another day, Kemble showed up to find a vehicle parked just inches from the hydrant, blocking his way. Local police ordered the owner to remove the vehicle a short time later.

"I own this water," Stevens said. "I can take it back to my house where I am, I can throw it back in the lake. I can do whatever I want with the water. It belongs to me, and I pay the account for it."

Added Kemble: "This isn't World War III, this isn't Armageddon. This is not the last bit of water in the world. We're delivering water to people that don't have water. What their problem is, I don't know."

An independent verification by Action News of several Jessup Street residents in early February found only

one man concerned with Stevens' activities. He declined to give his name, but said the water should stay within the borough's boundaries.

Emails highlight concerns, criticisms

Members of the Montrose Borough Council — either at the request of their constituents, or of their own volition — have gotten in on the act as well, although they've kept their true feelings out of the public eye.

However, a string of emails obtained by Action News in February shows the hydrant — along with Stevens and some of his cohorts — have drawn the council's ire.

Those emails portray a distaste of Stevens and others, and a strong urge to restrict those who show up to the council's bi-monthly public meetings.

The conversation among five members of council, as well as its solicitor, Marion O'Malley, which took place Feb. 6-7, includes colorful language.

In one exchange, Councilman Sean Granahan refers to Stevens and others as “thugs” and “lake poachers.”

In a Feb. 7 response to Councilwoman Julianne Skinner, Granahan writes: “I cannot speak for the rest, but I for one did not anticipate the Dimock thuggery from last night.”

He said Dimock residents are “looking to pirate our water and pocket the proceeds from their royalties and settlements.”

At one point, Skinner cautions Granahan on his use of language.

“Might I suggest that we not refer to fellow citizens in such a condescending manner? It will not bode well if emails should ever be subpoenaed (sic).”

Council members have declined repeated requests for comment.

Settlement: Access too restrictive

On Feb. 6, Stevens, local activist Vera Scroggins and Craig and Julie Sautner, who live on Carter Road, showed up to a borough meeting armed with video cameras. They wanted to document a planned discussion of Stevens' hydrant. The meeting never made it that far.

Instead, members of council walked out, taking the lead of council President Tom Lamont.

Lamont declined comment that night, but had no problem complaining to his fellow legislators, at 9:46 p.m., writing: “I’m not going to be here for this (expletive) and the minute any of it hits the telephone at work or starts to interfere with my livelihood, I’m done. “

Councilman Craig Reimel told Lamont and others he wasn't sure about the walkout because it took away from the borough's regular business of serving taxpayers.

“I don't know if we did the right thing tonight,” Reimel writes. “I feel badly that we had other business we could not get to because of this circus, but like you, I don't want every comment scrutinized by who knows what group and fed to the media as proof of something we did or didn't do.”

Although Pennsylvania Sunshine Laws allow the use of recording devices during public meetings, Granahan

— an attorney by trade — said he would have had Stevens and others arrested.

“As I stated earlier, I would have arrested them and let them spend the night in Kenny’s lock up,” Granahan wrote.

Granahan said O’Malley “is looking into the various means of restricting their [non-borough residents’] access to us at a meeting ... we can pile on a host of restrictions for filming, and make it unpalatable for them to come and disrupt, which is all they are seeking to do.’

Writes O’Malley on Feb. 7: “The Sunshine Act does allow for the recording of public meetings, so that’s too bad....The size of the meeting room should work in our favor to some extent.”

The council's Feb. 14 meeting drew media from several organizations, inquiring about the walkout, and about the adoption of new rules governing audio and video recording, as well as audience comments during public meetings.

With the exception of Skinner, all council members declined comment, scurrying out the door shortly after the meeting adjourned.

The first draft of the rules, adopted by a vote of 4-1, restricted audience comments to borough residents only, and required cameras to be unmanned, mounted on tripods and placed in the back of the room.

Skinner, who cast the lone dissenting vote, said at the time she was disappointed with her fellow council members' behavior toward the public.

"The way this was put together, it seems to me, is an intent to contravene the ability of the public to be informed," Skinner said after the Feb. 14 meeting. "I feel that it was ramrodded through. There wasn't enough time for discussion. More points should have been discussed."

A settlement later reached behind closed doors in Susquehanna County Court scaled back the prohibitions, allowing anyone, standing or sitting, to use recording devices. Council approved the new rules, based on the court agreement, March 5.

In the meantime, water deliveries from Monroe to Dimock Twp. continue. But Kemble said the past few months have made him more aware, and more vigilant, of his safety.

"I watch everything around me at all times," he said, filling up the tank in mid-February. "I will not turn my back, cause you just don't know what's going on. You can't trust anybody. You don't know where they come from. You don't know what they're going to do."